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SUBJECT: THE DUTCH MUSLIM COMMUNITY: A PRIMER

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[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Muslim community in the Netherlands is the second largest in Europe as a percentage of total population (5.8 percent). It is also one of the least-well integrated and most alienated, and according to polls looks less favorably on the United States than Muslim communities elsewhere in Europe. Muslims in the Netherlands are significantly poorer, less educated and more prone to arrest than native Dutch. Their status has become the country's most salient political issue and will be a key factor in upcoming local and national elections. This cable examines the Muslim community, discusses tensions between it and traditional Dutch society, and assesses some of the social and political consequences arising there from. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)I. THE COMMUNITY

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Muslim community in the Netherlands numbers approximately 945,000. According to official GONL statistics, the majority are relatively recent immigrant "guest workers" and their descendants from Turkey (365,000) and Morocco (315,000). Other Muslim communities include Iranians (29,000), Iraqis (44,000) and Somalis (22,000). Unlike Turkish and Moroccan guest workers, most from these smaller communities came to Holland seeking political asylum.

RAPID GROWTH

[1](#)3. (SBU) Between 1970 and 1995, the number of Muslims living in the Netherlands rose from a few thousand to 630,000, or 4.1 percent of the population. Most were poor, often from rural areas of Turkey and Morocco. Chosen to work in factory jobs, they tended to be uneducated and often illiterate. Unlike many Muslim immigrants in Britain and France, those who came to the Netherlands had no colonial connection or historic ties to their new homes, and did not speak the language. Assuming most would return to their country of origin, the Dutch made few attempts to incorporate them into society.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Between 1995 and 2004, the number of Muslims rose to 945,000, or 5.8 percent of the population. Although fewer are immigrating for economic reasons today, the Muslim population continues to rise, largely because of high birthrates and the practice of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants marrying partners from their countries of origin. According to a September 20, 2005 report on integration in the Netherlands compiled by the Dutch government, almost 90 percent of Turks and Moroccans marry spouses from their own communities; of those, 60 percent bring partners from their home countries.

[1](#)5. (SBU) The Dutch define "immigrants" -- in Dutch, "allochtonen" -- to include actual immigrants and secondgeneration descendants. Immigrants currently comprise roughly 16 percent of the population; 5.8 percent of the population is Muslim.

URBAN CONCENTRATION

[1](#)6. (SBU) The largest concentrations of Muslims live in poor, segregated neighborhoods in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. A recent study characterized these neighborhoods as deteriorating, with rampant social problems. According to the Amsterdam City Council only 51 percent of those living in Amsterdam are "native" Dutch, compared to 55 percent five years ago.

[1](#)7. (SBU) The trend is similar in other big cities. The population of Rotterdam is 621,000, of which 189,000 or 30 percent are considered minorities. The Hague's population is 469,000, of which 35 percent or 166,000 are minority. Utrecht's total population is 275,000, 24 percent of which are minority residents. The fact that Muslim minority populations are concentrated in cities has exacerbated tensions with native Dutch in these communities. What the Dutch term "white flight" is a disturbing trend in major cities.

II. SOCIAL/POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

18. (SBU) The Islamic community is served by an extensive network of mosques and cultural centers, the majority of which accommodate Turkish and Moroccan communities. Of the country's 400 mosques, more than 200 serve Turks, some 140 serve Moroccans, and roughly 50 serve Surinamese. Mosques and cultural centers fall under a national system of subsidies that underwrites cultural activities, so nearly all receive government funds. There is significant foreign influence: almost all imams are foreign-born and many mosques receive funds from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

19. (SBU) Most mosques are not controversial, but there are exceptions. Dutch security services have at least five under intense surveillance, including Al Fourqaan in Eindhoven, As-Soennah in The Hague and Al Tawheed in Amsterdam. The government has recently taken contentious steps to limit the influence of such mosques, including proposing that foreign imams be barred from preaching. Last summer Immigration and Integration Minister Rita Verdonk declared three imams in Eindhoven personae non grata for allegedly recruiting members for extremist groups. The three have been ordered to leave the country. One has done so; the other two are appealing in court.

110. (SBU) Despite pressure from right-wing politicians, the government has refrained from closing "radical" mosques. Many believe such a step would be perceived as a serious violation of Dutch religious tolerance. Also, during a recent meeting with emboffs, National Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Tjibbe Joustra said there is a debate on the wisdom of expelling radical imams because doing so might increase alienation and radicalization.

ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

111. (SBU) Under the Dutch education system, Muslim schools are eligible for government funding, as are Catholic and Protestant schools. Holland has 47 Islamic schools, including two secondary schools, and there are applications to open at least six more. The mainstream press regularly publishes sensationalist articles that such schools blacken their windows during Christmas, expunge references to the Holocaust from their texts, and so forth. A representative of the Islamic Schools Administrative Organization recently asserted that Muslims are demanding Islamic schools because of growing prejudice against the community, which "feels that it is put offside in Dutch Society and associates less and less with available institutions." Similarly, the Turkish Embassy reports an increase in the number of Turkish teenagers returning to Turkey for school to escape what they view as growing anti-Muslim prejudice.

112. (SBU) Although many observers have expressed concern that Islamic schools perpetuate segregation and alienation, major political parties here are reluctant to cut funding since doing so would threaten funding for all religiously affiliated institutions-- a mainstay of Dutch society. Instead, schools with a high-percentage of non-native Dutch students receive supplemental subsidies to help students learn Dutch and to create a "safe" environment. Islamic schools must meet the same curriculum criteria as any statefunded school. Dutch classes are mandatory.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

113. (SBU) There is no effective political representation of the Dutch Muslim community on the national level. While nine of the Second Chamber's 150 members are Muslim, none speaks for a broader Muslim constituency, and none has sought to play such a role. In part, this reflects the Dutch political system, which discourages constituency-based politics in favor of disciplined national parties. Party leaders usually select parliamentary candidates for their perceived electability and standing within the party, and frown on members developing separate ethnic or regional followings.

114. (SBU) On the local level, the situation is even more striking. In the three large cities where Muslims are most heavily concentrated, they are severely underrepresented. Amsterdam has one Muslim alderman; The Hague and Rotterdam have none. (The Amsterdam alderman - Ahmed Aboutaleb - is the most popular politician among Dutch Muslims, according to a recent survey). Mayors and other senior officials in all three cities are non-Muslim. Despite large numbers of potential voters in these cities, voter turnout among Muslims is low.

115. (SBU) Groups within the Netherlands have periodically floated the idea of starting a Dutch Islamic party. In a

recent poll of 500 Muslims, almost half believed an Islamic political party was desirable, but most also said it would be difficult for such a party to bridge the gap between Holland's disparate Muslim communities. The Contact Body for Muslims and Government is not a political party but as an advisory body to the government, claims to represent 80 percent of the Muslim community. It acts as a sort of public mouthpiece for the various Muslim communities and dialogues with the national government on social and political issues. The Dutch government does not keep records on the voting patterns of individual ethnic or religious groups in the Netherlands, so it is difficult to say which of the mainstream parties is most popular among the Muslim community.

III. SOCIAL FRICTIONS

16. (SBU) Since the fall of 2001 and especially since the November 2004 killing of Theo van Gogh, resentment of Muslims and Islamic culture is increasingly apparent. The Dutch public is moving toward the political right in their response to Muslim issues, and their leaders are following suit. Populist politician Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002, received broad support for his characterization of Islam as "a backward culture." Other politicians such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders regularly issue provocative statements about Islam that stir outrage among Muslims and pander to the prejudices of non-Muslims. While mainstream political leaders continue to preach integration rather than separation, nearly all have made tougher integration policies and cracking down on religious extremism part of their platform going into the next elections.

17. (SBU) The two main pollsters in the Netherlands recently wrote that "fear of Islam and irritation about insufficient integration of immigrants play a dominant brain position in the heads of native Dutch. Whether we surveyed national security issues, religious statements or political preference, it appears again and again that negative sentiment towards immigrants and Muslims have the upper hand, and significantly influence behavior and opinion."

18. (SBU) In January 2005 two-thirds of native Dutch polled said they feared a terrorist attack by Muslim fundamentalists. Asked about Muslims in general, roughly one-third expressed negative opinions. Four in ten object to Muslims bringing spouses from their home countries, arguing that such immigration hampers the integration of Muslims in the Netherlands.

SEGREGATION AND DISCRIMINATION

19. (SBU) For its part, the Muslim community convincingly argues that ingrained segregation and discrimination are facts of life in the Netherlands. In a June 2005 report entitled "Staying from Each Other's Turf" the Dutch government's Social and Cultural Planning Bureau found that two-thirds of native Dutch have no contact with migrants outside work -- either because they do not live in their neighborhoods or because they deliberately avoid contact with them.

20. (SBU) Seventy percent of Turks, 60 percent of Moroccans, and 50 percent of Somalis have limited their social contacts to their own communities. The government planning bureau called it "worrisome" that Turks and Moroccans are increasingly withdrawing into their own communities and have less and less contact with "white" Dutch. The lack of contact between communities in turn reduces incentives for immigrants to learn Dutch and limits their ability to find jobs. Feelings of resentment are not exclusive among the lower and uneducated ethnic population, polls show that those with higher incomes and better educations who do come into regular contact with "white" Dutch also tend to have the most negative opinion of Dutch society, as they are more likely to experience direct discrimination on a regular basis both in the workplace and socially (e.g., at bars and clubs.)

21. (SBU) The education level of non-Western immigrants lags significantly behind native Dutch, even though it has risen noticeably in the past 15 years. In 2003, 15 percent of the non-western immigrants had completed higher education (including both college and university), compared to 25 percent of native Dutch. Participation of non-western immigrant women in higher education rose more rapidly than men. Of the non-Western immigrants more than 25 percent completed only elementary school.

22. (SBU) A recent study found that among equally qualified native Dutch and Moroccan students from mid-level vocational training colleges, Moroccan students are 30 percent less likely to be invited for apprentice interviews than native

Dutch students.

IV. SOCIAL/POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

123. (SBU) Social statistics paint a grim picture: sixteen percent of the minority population is unemployed compared to 6 percent of the majority population; 25 percent receive welfare benefits versus 13 percent of the majority population and 29 percent live in poverty compared to 8 percent of native Dutch.

124. (SBU) Dutch society is only now coming to terms with the fact that many of the nearly one million Muslims in the Netherlands have poorly integrated. Even before the van Gogh murder, many Dutch privately expressed frustration that large segments of the Muslim and especially the Moroccan community have been less successful at integrating into Dutch society than previous immigrant groups. This perception is supported by statistics; a recent INR poll, for example, found that nearly 80 percent of Dutch Muslims identified with their religion or ethnicity far more than the Netherlands -- the highest percentage in Europe. Ethnic minorities are also severely over represented in the crime figures. Younger members of first-generation non-Western ethnic minorities accounted for 35 percent of the prison population in 2004. Not only does the lack of integration lead to more criminal activity, it also helps perpetuate stark social divides on issues such as the role of women, homosexual rights, and corporal punishment.

125. (SBU) Polls reveal that half of the native Dutch population and half of the Turks and Moroccans believe that a Western lifestyle is incompatible with a Muslim lifestyle. Native Dutch are primarily concerned about the position of Muslim women, who they believe enjoy too few freedoms. Turks and Moroccans are mainly bothered by the perceived lack of respect for their cultures by native Dutch.

126. (SBU) There is growing support within the non-Muslim community that integration should be mandatory rather than voluntary. In this spirit, the Dutch are taking a number of steps to force Muslims to integrate, including obligatory language and integration courses for new immigrants. Despite the fact that 90 percent of new immigrants complete these courses, only 40 percent achieve sufficient language level to find employment.

127. (SBU) The government has also tightened immigration requirements to limit the prevailing practice of Muslims bringing over partners from their home country. Labor and management organizations have also been brought into the discussion to improve the position of minorities on the labor market and enhance employment opportunities.

POLITICAL OUTLOOK:

128. (SBU) All major parties recognize that "integration" will be a major issue in the March 2006 local elections and the May 2007 national vote. The government's approach to integration -- which balances outreach to the Muslim community with tougher immigration and anti-terrorism legislation -- enjoys wide-spread support in parliament, but has failed to resonate with the public at large. While it is still early, there are indications that popular pressures may drive most parties to the right on Muslim-related issues during the election campaigns.

129. (SBU) Some politicians, such as Geert Wilders, advocate significantly stronger measures, including a temporary ban on immigration, deprivation of Dutch citizenship and expulsion of immigrants who commit serious crimes or fail to pass an integration exam. Less drastic, but also controversial, is the proposal by Labor party opposition leader Wouter Bos to link access to social benefits and government services for immigrants to progress made integrating into Dutch society; eligibility for such benefits would be phased-in gradually rather than provided on arrival as is currently the case.

130. (SBU) Toughening social and political attitudes towards Muslims have not gone unnoticed by the Muslim community. Approximately 3000 Dutch Turks returned to Turkey last year, many claiming that they felt they no longer had a future in Holland (although improving economic prospects in Turkey no doubt also played a role.) This fall a more boisterous opposition came in the form of 6,000 protestors from Muslim organizations proclaiming, "Enough is enough" through the streets of Amsterdam. In the long term Moroccans and Turks may successfully integrate into Dutch society like the Surinamese and Indonesians before them, but in the near term feelings of alienation and mistrust continue to deepen and fester.

Blakeman